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Sermons of James Freeman Clarke

CHRIST AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE
LIGHT OF MODERN THOUGHT

XV.

The Atoning Work of Jesus in the
Light of Modern Thought

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THE ATONING WORK OF JESUS IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN THOUGHT.

"That he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth."—EPHESIANS i. 10.

ON such passages as this has been founded the doctrine of the Atonement, or the atoning work of Christ. Atonement is making at one, and is the same as reconciliation. This doctrine, in one form or another, has always been considered central and vital,—a part of the substance of Christianity. I believe that it is so, and that, when extricated from the speculations by which it has been too long obscured, it will be found to be full of beauty and power.

The tendency of thought is to bring unity out of variety; to reduce all elements and forces to one; to discover the central principle which shall harmonize all apparent antagonisms, the one law which shall govern the most complex phenomena. Such were the theory of Copernicus, Newton's law of gravitation, the doctrine of evolution as a law of progressive development, and the hypothesis that all the forces of nature are but different forms of one force. The tendency of thought is "to gather together all things in one."

It is apparent that, as Science advances along this path, it tends continually toward the belief in one supreme, universal power, who is the harmony of creation. And thus it leads us toward the same point with the gospel, which shows to us "God gathering all things together in one through Christ Jesus."

We live in a world of struggle, antagonism, warfare. Even the forces of nature are not yet in complete harmony. The destructive earthquake in the island of Ischia, the terrible volcanic outbreak in the straits of Sunda, and the desolating tornadoes in the Western States are evidence of this. Animals live, to a great extent, in a state of conflict with each other. Human life is rent asunder by the strifes of nations, sects, parties. Trade is a system of violent competition, in which the strong succeed and the weak go to the ground.

More than this, man is in conflict with himself. The flesh struggles against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh, so that we cannot do the things we would. Men are fettered by low desires; they are the slaves of covetousness, intemperance, vanity, pride, worldliness.

How many characters have been ruined in our time by the mad desire for riches! Respectable men, heads of families, members of Christian churches, after years of honorable industry, are suddenly found to have taken money not their own, and lost it in speculations in the stock market. Almost every newspaper we read has some instance of this sort. The paragraph is a short one. It simply says that Mr. A., a confidential clerk, has disappeared, having taken funds belonging to his employers; that Mr. B., the cashier of a bank, has been using the funds in his hands to speculate in stocks, and has been arrested; that Mr. C., a well-known citizen of such or such a place, has been using the funds belonging to the estate of widows and orphans, of which he was the trustee, in an unsuccessful business operation. The paragraph is short, and simple; but how much it implies! What misery in families, what desolate homes, what a sense of disgrace, what anguish unutterable to wives and children!

This is the state of war in which we are living. If we look at politics, what do we see there? A like struggle of

parties and individuals for the control of offices, for the possession of power, to carry the next election. Let some measure be proposed which sensible and disinterested men of all parties agree to be necessary,—for example, to reduce an immoderate taxation on the necessities of life. Instead of judging what ought to be done by the merits of the case, the politicians say: “It will not do to reduce the tax on sugar, for our party will lose the vote of Louisiana. We must not lower the duty on wool, and give cheap clothes to the people, for then Ohio will vote against us. Iron is, to be sure, the raw material of all manufactures; but, if we lower the duty on that, we shall offend Pennsylvania.” Thus the questions which come before Congress are not decided by considerations of justice and right, but by those of party expediency.

If this were the whole truth, it would be very discouraging. But there is another side. No matter how bad the times are, there are honest and good people in every place, in every business, in every part of society. In tens of thousands of homes, men and women are pursuing with patient industry their daily duties from morning till evening. The great world of business is carried on by honest men. All trade rests on the confidence which men feel that others mean to do right; that they will meet their obligations, fulfil their contracts, and carry out their engagements, no matter at what loss to themselves.

I have no doubt that, if you go to Washington, you will find that most of the members of Congress really wish to do what is right. They are perplexed by an apparent conflict of duties, misled by plausible arguments, find it hard to resist the pressure of personal appeals and overwhelming influence. We often think worse of such bodies at a distance than when we come to know them.

And so it is with those who fall into vice and are led into crime. When we hear of what they have done, we are filled

with indignation, and think they deserve only punishment. But, if we see them and talk with them, we often think they are indeed to be blamed, but still more to be pitied. They were more weak than wicked in what they did. They were led on so gradually, so slowly, they did not realize what they were doing; they were misled by the example of others until at last they had gone so far that they thought it too late to go back. Men are not all black nor all white. Good men have a great deal of evil in them, but perhaps they are able to restrain it and keep it down. Bad men often have good purposes, longings for what is right, hours of bitter self-condemnation and self-reproach; but their will is not quite strong enough to enable them to conquer the evil. Condemn them, if you must, but pity them, too. Let us not be too confident in our own virtue. "Let him that standeth take heed lest he fall." "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation." "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

These are the antagonisms of life; these the struggles that are going on all round us, and within us, too. And now what hope is there of the good conquering the evil, of peace putting an end to war, truth gaining the victory over falsehood, and the world rising into an ultimate harmony? Will God gather together in one all things in heaven and on earth? Will he give unity and peace to your heart and mine? Shall those who hunger and thirst after righteousness be filled? What is the principle of this unity? What is it that shall put an end to these antagonisms?

The principle which produces the warfare is selfishness. The principle of union is the opposite: it is the forgetting of self in a generous love of right and truth; it is the desire of doing good. Wherever this principle comes, it softens rivalries and puts an end to hostility.

Moreover, those who are above must help those who are

below; those who are safe must protect those who are in danger; those who have faith must inspire the doubters with confidence; those who are strong must support the weak. It will not do to make the good better, and to leave the bad in their misery. That maybe the theory of social philosophy. It may say, "Let the lower races and the more degraded individuals die out and disappear, and the better ones take their place." One fatal defect in that plan is that you cannot escape the contagion of misery and suffering by refusing to see it. The human race is inextricably woven together by ten thousand mutual dependencies. If one member suffers, all suffer. By the side of the pure and good are the base and desperate. Death goes up into the palaces from the moral pestilence at the door. Until all are saved, no one is perfectly safe, and God does not mean that we should be safe till we are willing to save others.

This is the Christian theory. This is the idea in which is given to us the great Christian hope. It is that God in his infinite blessedness is not satisfied to remain alone, apart from his children, but comes to this world to help us. He shows himself in this noblest soul of time, his well-beloved Son, as seeking to save those who are lost. "God is in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." Jesus, the noblest example of human elevation, God-like in spirit and purpose, did not go apart from men to preserve his holiness and keep himself intact. He did not make personal salvation his purpose, or aim at individual holiness. He did not go into a wilderness to rise nearer to heaven on the pinions of solitary prayer and meditation and lonely self-denial. He went among publicans and sinners. He left the ninety-and-nine in the wilderness, and went after the one lost sheep in the wilderness till he found it. That is the divine idea revealed in the character of Christ. When we see this self-sacrificing love, we see not Jesus, but his Father. When we know

how Jesus felt toward the sinner, we know how God feels toward the sinner. We see that it is the divine will to gather in one all things in Christ, all things on earth and in heaven, into a blessed harmony of love.

Another point in which the Christian theory differs from that of social science is this: Social science works on classes and masses of men, Christianity upon individuals. Social science proposes to help the paupers, the intemperate, the criminals, the dangerous classes. Christianity knows nothing of classes. It knows only the individual soul. It is the only real democratic principle, for it makes all souls equal before God. Christ brings to every human soul, first, the sense of a great need, then the gift of a great supply. It teaches us to feel ourselves poor, that we may be rich; shows us that we have nothing, and possess all things; that in ourselves we are empty, blind, naked, and helpless, but that in God we can be all things and do all things. Thus, through the sense of obligation and sense of dependence, each soul is brought to God, and made one with him. And every soul thus made one with God has in itself the power by which others may be reconciled and brought also into union with God. This is the first step in the atoning work of Christ, that we who are afar off are made nigh. God in Christ comes near to his children. He is not a great, terrible power; he is not a cold, relentless law; but he is the Friend and Father. Thus the prayer of Jesus is fulfilled: "I in them and thou in me, that they may be perfected into one." It is not that Christ brings God to us, but that he brings us to God. It is not that he reconciles God to us, for God was never away from us. He reconciles us to him. It is we who have access by the one Spirit of Love to the Father.

When souls are thus made one with God, the principle is put into them by which they can become one with each other. Those who love God must love God's children

whom he loves. Those whom he has forgiven must forgive others. "Be ye kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ has forgiven you." Social science can appeal to the principle of benevolence, or to what it calls Altruism; but Christ goes deeper, and appeals to our sense of God's love to us to induce us to love and help others. Social science can show us how to pity others, how to think for them; but Christ does more,—he makes us feel with them. This is the second part of the atoning work of Christ,—having made each of us one with God, he next makes us really one with our brother man. He takes out of us our conceit of superior goodness, our private sense of being better than others; he brings us to the broad platform of a common humanity. We are all weak, all needy, all dependent on an infinite goodness. The differences between man and man disappear. All souls belong to God; he loves them all; he wishes to save all. And, if we are grateful for his love to our own soul, we must show it by being his instruments, in bringing other souls to him.

The atoning work of Christ is, therefore, first, to reconcile man to God, then to reconcile man to man. This is the principle which goes down so deep and goes up so high that it can at last reconcile all antagonisms, put an end to all warfare, and bring all varieties into harmony.

This principle reconciles earthly and heavenly joy, the life which now is with that which is to come. Jesus was just as near God when he was feasting with the Pharisee or talking with publicans and sinners in the streets of Capernaum as when he was alone with God in the mountain, spending the whole night in prayer. To whatever scenes of life he himself went when on earth his religion may now go. God is in all things,—in the joy of life, in the shop and study, the street and the home. We can be with God in all. Not in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, shall men worship

the Father, but in the midst of amusement, in the beauty of nature, in cheerful relaxation, in earnest thought, in daily duty, we find church and ritual, hymn of praise and song of gratitude. We call the church and cathedral the house of God. But the world, not made by human hands, is still more the house of God and the gate of heaven. Science and art and history are also a priesthood. Poetry and mathematics, astronomy and chemistry, minister at this great altar.

“’Neath clustered boughs, each floral bell that swingeth,
And tolls its perfume on the passing air,
Makes Sabbath in the fields, and ever ringeth
A call to prayer!

“Not to the domes where crumbling arch and column
Attest the feebleness of mortal hand,
But to that fane most catholic and solemn
Which God hath planned;

“To that cathedral boundless as our wonder,
Whose quenchless lamps the sun and moon supply,
Its choir the winds and waves, its organ, thunder,
Its dome the sky!”

This principle of love, grateful love, which unites the human heart with God, also makes an atonement between man and man, between the soul and nature, between personal aims and generous affections, between reason and faith, time and eternity, the life here and the life hereafter. For he who is one with God in a child’s faith and confidence finds God present everywhere,—in his brother man, in nature, in the laws of the universe, in the events of history, in the march of science, in human inventions, in political struggles, in business, in pleasure, in home, in travel. God goes with him everywhere, and unites him happily and peacefully with all his creatures and all his works.

This is the vast principle, going down so deep and up so

high that at last it must fulfil the great hope of the apostle, and make all things at one in Christ, whether things on earth or things in heaven. The principle being given and being adequate, the final result is a mere question of time. This hope rests on the solid foundation of an inward experience. Therefore, in all ages, in the midst of terrible woes and persecutions, in the struggles of nations, the battle of sects and parties, this calm hope has remained, firmly fixed in the consciousness of the Christian Church, that Jesus is at last to conquer all these wars, and to become actually, as he always has been potentially, the Prince of Peace.

It is the power of this hope which has caused the progress of Christendom. Hope is essential to improvement. Without such a generous expectation, such an ideal vision, life would be only a dreary routine. In the power of this hope, missionaries have traversed all lands, bearing the blessings of civilization, education, light, and love to those who sit in the shadow of death. Animated by this hope, the Roman Catholic, Xavier, went to die in India; the Protestant, Livingstone, to perish in Africa, saying, almost with his dying lips, "I have come to see that the atoning work of Jesus means the love of God and man." In this hope the prosaic Puritans became poets, living in a vision of the coming kingdom of God. Following this hope, a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, the Pilgrim Fathers crossed the Atlantic. To the outward eye they were stiff and formal, but, in reality, the most ideal men of their age. Of them it might be said that they

... "dipt into the future, far as human eye could see;
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be";

saw a Christian Commonwealth, in which God should truly reign, in which Church and State should be one, all men be equal before God, in which every little child should be born

to have a free education in free schools, and in which God's will should be done on earth as in heaven.

This hope of a final redemption, in which all souls shall be reconciled to God and to each other, has prevented men from despairing at the sight of evil; has enabled them to work on patiently when the sky was dark with lowering clouds and coming storms. It has given them the victory over death and the grave. It has been a hope full of immortality. It has made this world one with the next; with the same God there as here, the same fatherly providence, the same bounteous provision for all our wants. It has given us one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in us all.